

***GEORGE
MANVILLE FENN***

A hand is shown holding a single, dried, brown rose. The hand and the rose are covered in a fine, shimmering red confetti. The background is a dark, textured surface, possibly a wall or a large piece of paper, also covered in the same red confetti. The overall mood is somber and reflective.

***WITNESS
TO THE DEED***

George Manville Fenn

Witness to the Deed

EAN 8596547369387

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



TABLE OF CONTENTS

["Witness to the Deed"](#)

[Chapter One.](#)

[Chapter Two.](#)

[Chapter Three.](#)

[Chapter Four.](#)

[Chapter Five.](#)

[Chapter Six.](#)

[Chapter Seven.](#)

[Chapter Eight.](#)

[Chapter Nine.](#)

[Chapter Ten.](#)

[Chapter Eleven.](#)

[Chapter Twelve.](#)

[Chapter Thirteen.](#)

[Chapter Fourteen.](#)

[Chapter Fifteen.](#)

[Chapter Sixteen.](#)

[Chapter Seventeen.](#)

[Chapter Eighteen.](#)

[Chapter Nineteen.](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty One.](#)

[Chapter Twenty Two.](#)

[Chapter Twenty Three.](#)

[Chapter Twenty Four.](#)

[Chapter Twenty Five.](#)

[Chapter Twenty Six.](#)
[Chapter Twenty Seven.](#)
[Chapter Twenty Eight.](#)
[Chapter Twenty Nine.](#)
[Chapter Thirty.](#)
[Chapter Thirty One.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Two.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Three.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Four.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Five.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Six.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Seven.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Eight.](#)
[Chapter Thirty Nine.](#)
[Chapter Forty.](#)
[Chapter Forty One.](#)
[Chapter Forty Two.](#)
[Chapter Forty Three.](#)
[Chapter Forty Four.](#)
[Chapter Forty Five.](#)
[Chapter Forty Six.](#)
[Chapter Forty Seven.](#)
[Chapter Forty Eight.](#)
[Chapter Forty Nine.](#)
[Chapter Fifty.](#)
[Chapter Fifty One.](#)
[Chapter Fifty Two.](#)
[Chapter Fifty Three.](#)
[Chapter Fifty Four.](#)

Chapter Fifty Five.

"Witness to the Deed"

[Table of Contents](#)

Chapter One.

[Table of Contents](#)

In Benchers' Inn.

"My darling! Mine at last!" *Ting-tang; ting-tang; ting-tang.*

Malcolm Stratton, F.Z.S., naturalist, a handsome, dark-complexioned man of eight-and-twenty, started and flushed like a girl as he hurriedly thrust the photograph he had been apostrophising into his breast pocket, and ran to the deep, dingy window of his chambers to look at the clock over the old hall of Bencher's Inn, E.C. It was an unnecessary piece of business, for there was a black marble clock on the old carved oak chimney-piece nestling among Grinling Gibbons' wooden flowers and pippins, and he had been dragging his watch from his pocket every ten minutes since he had risen at seven, taken his bath, and dressed; but he had forgotten the hour the next minute, and gone on making his preparations, haunted by the great dread lest he should be too late.

"Quarter to ten yet," he muttered. "How slowly the time goes!" As he spoke he sniffed slightly and smiled, for a peculiar aromatic incense-like odour had crept into the room through the chinks in a door.

He stepped back to where a new-looking portmanteau lay upon the Turkey carpet, and stood contemplating it for a few moments.

“Now, have I forgotten anything?”

This question was followed by a slow look round the quaint, handsomely furnished old oak-panelled room, one of several suites let out to bachelors who could pay well, and who affected the grim old inn with its plane trees, basin of water, and refreshing quiet, just out of the roar of the busy city street. And as Malcolm Stratton looked round his eyes rested on his cases of valuable books and busts of famous naturalists, and a couple of family portraits, both of which seemed to smile at him pleasantly; and then on and over natural history specimens, curious stuffed birds, a cabinet of osteological preparations, and over and around the heavy looking carvings and mouldings about the four doorways, and continued from the fireplace up to the low ceiling. But, look where he would, he could see nothing but a beautiful face with large, pensive eyes, gazing with loving trust in his as he had seen them only a few hours before when he had said “good-night.”

“Bah! I shall never be ready,” he cried, with an impatient laugh, and crossing to one of the doorways—all exactly alike—he disappeared for a moment or two, to return from his bedroom with a black bag, which he hastily strapped, set down, paused to think for a moment, and then taking out his keys opened the table-drawer, took out a cheque book, and sat down to write.

“May as well have enough,” he said merrily. “I’ve waited long enough for this trip, and a man does not get married

every day. One—fifty. Signature. Bah! Don't cross it, stupid!"

He tore out the cheque, threw back the book, and locked the drawer, before going to a door on the right-hand side of the fireplace, bending forward and listening.

"Wonder he has not been in," he muttered. "Now let's see. Anything else? How absurd! Haven't finished my coffee."

He took the cup from the table, drained it, and, after another look round, turned to the left side of the fireplace, where he opened a door corresponding to the one at which he had listened, went in, and returned directly with an ice axe and an alpenstock.

"May as well take them," he said. "Myra can use you."

He gave the alpenstock a rub with the table napkin before placing it and his old mountaineering companion against the bag. Then, bending down, he was busily strapping the portmanteau and forcing the tongue of the last buckle into its proper hole when there was a knock at the door behind him, and he started to his feet.

"Come in!"

The answer was a second knock, and with an impatient ejaculation the occupant of the chambers threw open the fourth door.

"I forgot the bolt was fastened, Mrs Brade," he said, as he drew back to admit a plump looking, neatly dressed woman in cap and apron, one corner of which she took up to begin rolling between her fingers as she stood smiling at the edge of the carpet.

"Yes, sir," she said, "if I might make so bold, and I don't wonder at it. Oh, my dear—I mean Mr Stratton, sir—how

handsome you do look this morning!”

“Why, you silly old woman!” he cried, half laughing, half annoyed.

“Oh, no, excuse me, sir, not a bit. Handsome is as handsome does, they say, and you is and does too, sir, and happiness and joy go with you, sir, and your dear, sweet lady too, sir.”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, Mrs Brade, but—”

“I always thought as you would marry some day, sir, as was only natural, but I never thought as a widow would be your lot.”

“Mrs Brade!” cried Stratton impatiently, and with his brows contracting a little. “I am very busy—not a moment to spare.”

“Of course, sir, and no wonder; but I do wish it hadn’t been such a dull morning.”

“Dull?” cried Stratton, rushing to the window; “I thought it was all sunshine.”

“Of course you did, sir; so did I; and well I remember it, though it’s forty years ago.”

“Mrs Brade, I told you I was busy. I thank you for your congratulations, and I gave you all your instructions yesterday, so pray what do you want?”

Mrs Brade, wife of the inn porter, lifted the corner of her apron to her mouth, and made a sound like the stifling of a laugh.

“I beg your pardon, sir, I’m sure, and of course it’s natural at such a time. I came because you sent word by the waiter that I was to—”

“Of course, yes: about ten. I’m so busy, I forgot,” cried Stratton hastily. “Look here, Mrs Brade, I want you to go over to the bank; it will be open by the time you get across. Cash this cheque for me; bring all notes—tens and fives.”

“A hundred and fifty pounds, sir?”

“Yes; take a hand bag with you. Don’t get robbed.”

“Oh, no, sir. I know too much of the ways of London town.”

“That’s right. Excuse my being hurried with you.”

“Of course, sir; I know well what your feelings must be. (Sniff, sniff.) Why, you can smell Mr Brettison a-smoking his ubble-bubble with that strange tobacco right in here.”

As the woman spoke she went straight across to the door on the left of the fireplace.

“Here! where are you going?” cried Stratton.

“Back directly, sir,” came in smothered tones, accompanied by the pulling of a bath chain, the gurgling of water, and the sound of shutting down a heavy lid.

“Lor’, how strong Mr Brettison do smell, sir. It’s my memory’s got that bad, sir,” said the woman, reappearing and carefully shutting the door, “that I’m obliged to do things when I see them want doing, else I forgets. It was only yesterday that Mr Brettison—”

“Mrs Brade, the cheque, please.”

“Of course, sir,” said the woman hastily just as there was a little rat-tat at the brass knocker of the outer door, which she opened.

“Here is Mr Brettison, sir,” and she drew back to admit a spare looking, grey man, dressed in dark tweed, who removed his soft felt hat and threw it, with a botanist’s

vasculum and a heavy oaken stick, upon an easy-chair, as he watched the departure of the porter's wife before turning quickly and, with tears in his eyes, grasping Stratton's hands and shaking them warmly.

"My dear boy," he said, in a voice full of emotion, "God bless you! Happiness to you! God bless you both!"

"My dear old friend!" cried Stratton. "Thank you; for Myra, too. But come, you've repented. You will join the wedding party after all?"

"I? Oh, no, no, my boy. I'm no wedding guest. Why, Malcolm, I should be a regular ancient mariner without the glittering eye."

"I am sorry. I should have liked you to be present," said Stratton warmly.

"I know it, my boy, I know it; but no; don't press me. I couldn't bear it. I was to have been married, my dear boy. I was young, if not as handsome as you. But,"—there was a pause—"she died," he added in a whisper. "I could not bear to come."

"Mr Brettison!"

"There," cried the visitor with forced gaiety, "just what I said. No, my dear Malcolm. No, no, my boy. I'm better away."

Stratton was silent, and his neighbour went on hastily:

"I heard you packing, and knocking about, but I wouldn't disturb you, my dear boy. I'm off, too: a week's collecting in the New Forest. Write to me very soon, and my dear love to your sweet wife—an angel, Malcolm—a blessing to you, my boy. Tell her to let you gather a few of the mountain flowers

to send me. Ask her to pick a few herself and I'll kiss them as coming from her."

"I'll tell her, sir."

"That's right; and, Malcolm, my boy, I'm quite alone in the world, where I should not have been now if you had not broken in my door and came and nursed me back to life, dying as I was from that deadly fever."

"My dear Mr Brettison, if ever you mention that trifle of neighbourly service again we are no longer friends," cried Stratton.

"Trifle of neighbourly service!" said the old man, laying his hands affectionately upon the other's shoulders. "You risked your life, boy, to save that of one who would fain have died. But Heaven knows best, Malcolm, and I've been a happier man since, for it has seemed to me as if I had a son. Now, one word more and I am going. I've a train to catch. Tell your dear young wife that Edward Brettison has watched your career—that the man who was poor and struggled so hard to place himself in a position to win her will never be poor again: for I have made you my heir, Malcolm, and God bless you, my boy. Good-bye; write soon."

"Mr Brettison!" cried Stratton, in amaze.

"Hush!"

The door opened, and Mrs Brade reappeared with a black reticule in one hand and a ruddy telegram envelope in the other.

"I see, wanted already," said the old man, hastily catching up hat, stick, and collecting box, and hurrying out without another word.

"Telegram, sir; and there's the change, sir."

“Eh! The notes? Thank you, Mrs Brade,” said Stratton hurriedly, and taking the packet he laid them on the table and placed a bronze letter weight to keep them down. “That will do, thank you, Mrs Brade. Tell your husband to fetch my luggage, and meet me at Charing Cross. He’ll take a cab, of course.”

“I shall be there, too, sir, never you fear,” said the porter’s wife, with a smile, as she left the room, Stratton hurriedly tearing open the envelope the while, and reading as the door closed:

No bride’s bouquet. What a shame! See to it at once.

Edie.

“Confound!” ejaculated Stratton; “and after all their promises. Here, Mrs Brade, quick. Gone!”

He threw open the door to call the woman back, but before he could open his lips she had returned.

“A gen—gentleman to see you, sir, on business.”

“Engaged. Cannot see anyone. Look here, Mrs Brade.”

“Mr Malcolm Stratton, I presume,” said a heavily built man with a florid face, greyish hair, and closely cut foreign looking hair.

“My name, sir, but I am particularly engaged this morning. If you have business with me you must write.”

This at the doorway, with Mrs Brade standing a little back on the stone landing.

“No time for writing,” said the stranger sternly. “Business too important. Needn’t wait, Mrs what’s-your-name,” he

continued, turning upon the woman so sharply that she began to hurry down the stairs.

"I don't care how important your mission is, sir," cried Stratton; "I cannot give you an interview this morning. If you have anything to say you must write. My business—"

"I know," said the man coolly: "going to be married."

Stratton took a step back, and his visitor one forward into the room, turned, closed the outer door, and, before Stratton could recover from his surprise, the inner door, and pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," said the man, and he took another chair and sat back in it.

"Well of all the audacious—!" began Stratton, with a half laugh; but he was interrupted.

"Don't waste words, sir; no time. The lady will be waiting."

As he spoke Stratton saw the man's eyes rest for a moment on the banknotes beneath the letter weight, and an undefined sensation of uneasiness attacked him. He mastered it in an instant, ignoring the last remark.

"Now, sir; you say you have business with me. Let me hear it, since I must—at once."

"Ah, that's businesslike. We shall be able to deal."

"Say what you have to say."

"When you sit down."

Stratton let himself fall back into a chair.

"Now then. Quick!"

"You propose being married this morning."

"I do," said Stratton, with a sort of dread lest even then there should be some obstacle in the way.

“Well, then, you can’t; that’s all.”

“What!” cried Stratton fiercely. “Who says so?”

“I do. But keep cool, young man. This is business.”

“Yes; I’ll be cool,” said Stratton, mastering himself again, and adopting his visitor’s cynical manner. “So let me ask you, sir, who you may be, and what is your object in coming?”

The man did not answer for a moment, but let his eyes rest again upon the notes.

“I say, who are you, sir?”

“I? Oh, nobody of any importance,” said the man, with an insolent laugh.

Stratton sprang up, and the visitor thrust his hand behind him.

“No nonsense, Mr Malcolm. I tell you this is business. Without my consent you cannot marry Myra Barron, formerly Myra Jerrold, this morning.”

“I say, who are you, sir?” cried Stratton furiously.

“James Barron, my dear sir—the lady’s husband.”

“Good God!”

Chapter Two.

[Table of Contents](#)

Two Shots from a Revolver.

Malcolm Stratton started back with his eyes wild and his face ghastly, just as there was the faint sound of steps on the stone stairs, and directly after someone gave a long-continued double knock on the outer door.

“Company, eh?” said the man, rising. “Get rid of him. I’ve a lot to say. I’ll go in here.”

He went straight to the doorway on the right of the fireplace.

“No, no,” cried Stratton harshly; “that is a false door.”

“False door?” said the man; “is this?”

He laid his hand upon the other on the left of the fireplace, and opened it.

“All right. Bath room. I’ll go in here.”

As the man shut himself in Stratton reeled as if he would have fallen, but a second *rat-tat* upon the little brass knocker brought him to himself, and, after a glance at the closet door, he opened that of the entry, and then the outer door, to admit a good looking, fair-haired young fellow of about five-and-twenty, most scrupulously dressed, a creamy rose in his buttonhole, and a look of vexation in his merry face as he stood looking at his white kid gloves.

“I say, old chap,” he cried, “I shall kill your housekeeper. She must have black-leaded that knocker. Morning. How are you. Pretty well ready?”

“Ready?” said Stratton hurriedly. “No, not yet. I’m sure I —”

“Why, hullo, old chap; what’s the matter?”

“Matter? Nothing, nothing.”

“Well, you look precious seedy. White about the gills. Why, hang it, Malcolm, don’t take it like that. Fancy you being nervous. What about? Packed up, I see.”

“Yes—yes.”

“Wish it was my turn,” continued the newcomer. “Might as well have been two couples: Mr and Mrs Malcolm

Stratton; Mr and Mrs Percy Guest. Why, I say, old chap, you are ill.”

“No, no,” cried Stratton hurriedly; and a sudden thought struck him.

Catching up the telegram from the table, he handed it to his friend.

“Hullo! Nothing serious? Poof! What a molehill mountain. You shouldn’t let a thing like this agitate your noble nerves. Bless the dear little woman. I’ll run on to Common Garden, Central Avenue, as we say in some suckles, bully the beggar for not sending it, start him, and be back for you in a jiffy.”

“No, no,” cried Stratton excitedly, “don’t trust them. Get the bouquet, and take it yourself. Don’t come back. I’ll meet you at the church.”

“All right, old chap. Your slave obeys. Only, I say, I would have a duet—S. and B.—before I started. Screw up, and don’t come with a face like that.”

The speaker went to the door, opened it, and looking round laughingly: “Precious dull; I’ll tell ’em to turn on the sun,” he said, and hurried out.

As the outer door closed Stratton darted to the inner and shut it, while, as he turned, his unwelcome visitor stepped out of the bath room—evidently formerly a passage leading into the next chamber—and returned to his chair, “Best man—bouquets—carriages waiting—church—wedding breakfast,” he said laughingly. “By Jove! I could drink a tumbler of champagne.”

By this time Stratton had grown firmer, and, pointing to the door, he cried:

“Look here, sir; I’ll have no more of this. You are an impostor. I don’t know where you obtained your information, but if you have come to levy blackmail on the strength of such a mad tale, you have failed; so go.”

“To my wife?”

“To the police-station if you dare to threaten me. Look here: James Barron, otherwise James Dale, died two years ago.”

“Then he has come to life again, that’s all,” said the man coolly. “Now, look here, you; I’ve not come to quarrel. I call on you, and of course it must be just dampening at such a time, but, you see, I had no option. It wasn’t likely that—be cool, will you? Let that poker rest!”

He spoke savagely, and took a revolver from a hip pocket.

“I say it wasn’t likely that you would be pleased to see me, and I’m not surprised at your crying impostor, because, as I well enough know, the papers said I was dead, and for the past two years my beautiful little wife has worn her widow’s weeds.”

Stratton made a gesture to start forward, but the man sat back in his chair and raised the pistol.

“I’m a very good shot,” he said coolly. “Be quiet and listen. I’m an impostor, am I? I was not married to Myra Jerrold, I suppose, directly after the old man had taken her for a continental tour with pretty, merry little Edie Perrin. Bless her—sweet little girl! I’d rather have had her if she had possessed Myra’s money. It’s all right, my dear sir. I can give you chapter and verse, and commas and full stops, too, if you want satisfying. But you do not; you know it’s all true.

Why don't I put in my claims? Well, there is that little unpleasantness with the police, and that is why," he continued as he toyed with the revolver. "I object to your calling them in to interfere. No, Mr Malcolm Stratton, I shall not let you call them in for more reasons than one. Ah! you begin to believe me. Let me see now, can I give you a little corroborative evidence? You don't want it, but I will. Did the admiral ever tell you what an excellent player I was at piquet?"

Stratton started.

"Yes, I see he did. And how I used to sing 'La ci darem' with Myra, and played the accompaniment myself? Yes, he told you that, too. My dear sir, I have a hundred little facts of this kind to tell you, including my race after Myra's horse when it took fright and she was thrown. By the way, has the tiny little red scar faded from her white temple yet?"

Stratton's face was ghastly now.

"I see I need say no more, sir. You are convinced Myra is my wife. There has been no divorce, you see, so you are at my mercy."

"But she is not at yours," cried Stratton fiercely. "You go back to your cell, sir, and she will never be polluted by the touch of such a scoundrel again."

"Polluted? Strong language, young man, and you are losing your temper. Once more, be cool. You see I have this, and I am not a man to be trifled with. I do not intend to go back to my cell: I had enough of that yonder, but mean to take my ease for the future. These chambers are secluded; a noise here is not likely to be heard, and I should proceed to extremities if you forced me."

“You dare to threaten me?”

“Yes, I dare to threaten you, my dear sir. But keep cool, I tell you. I didn’t come here to quarrel, but to do a little business. Did you expect me? I see you have the money ready.”

He pointed to the notes—notes to defray a blissful honeymoon trip—and Stratton had hard work to suppress a groan.

“There, I’m very sorry for you, my dear sir,” continued the scoundrel, “and I want to be friendly, both to you and poor little Myra—good little soul! She thought me dead; you thought me dead; and I dare say you love each other like pigeons. Next thing, I admired her, but she never cared a sou for me. Well, suppose I say that I’ll be dead to oblige you both. What do you say to that?”

Malcolm was silent.

“I never wanted the poor little lass. Frankly, I wanted her money, and the admiral’s too—hang the old rascal, he won about fifty pounds of me. But to continue. Now, Mr Malcolm Stratton, time is flying, and the lady will soon be at the church, where you must be first. I tell you that I will consent to keep under the tombstone where the law and society have placed me, for a handsome consideration. What do you propose?”

“To hand you over to the police,” said Stratton firmly, but with despair in his tone.

“No, you do not. You propose to give me the money on the table there, to sign an agreement to pay me three hundred a year as long as I keep dead, and then to go and

wed your pretty widow, and be off to the continent or elsewhere.”

Bigamy—blackmailed by a scoundrel who would make his life a hell—through constant threats to claim his wife—a score of such thoughts flashed through Stratton’s brain as he stood there before the cool, calculating villain watching him so keenly. Money was no object to him. Mr Brettison would let him have any amount, but it was madness to think of such a course. There was only one other—to free the innocent, pure woman he idolised from the persecution of such a wretch, and the law would enable him to do that.

Malcolm Stratton’s mind was made up, and he stood there gazing full in his visitor’s eyes.

“Well,” said the man coolly, “time is on the wing, as I said before. How much is there under that letter weight?”

“One hundred and fifty pounds,” said Stratton quietly.

“Write me a cheque for three hundred and fifty pounds then, and the bargain is closed.”

“Not for a penny,” said Stratton quietly.

“You will. The lady is waiting.”

“So are the police.”

“What!” cried the man, rising slowly and with a menacing look in his countenance. “No fooling, sir. You see this, and you know I shall not be trifled with. Once more let me remind you that a noise here would hardly be heard outside. But you are not serious. The prize for you is too great. Police? How could you marry the lady then? Do you think my proud, prudish little Myra would take you, knowing me to be alive? Stop, will you?” he cried with a savage growl like that

of a wild beast, “or, by all that’s holy—Here, what are you going to do, fool?”

“Summon the police,” cried Stratton, who was half-way to the door, as the man sprang at him with the activity of a panther.

For the next minute there was a desperate struggle, as the men wrestled here and there, both moved by one object—the possession of the deadly weapon.

Then one arm was freed, there was the sharp report of a pistol, and a puff of ill smelling smoke partially hid the struggling pair.

Another shot with the smoke more dense.

A heavy fall.

Then silence—deathlike and strange.

Outside, on the staircase a floor higher, a door was opened; there were steps on the stone landing, and a voice shouted down the well: “Anything the matter?” After a moment another voice was heard: “Nonsense—nothing. Someone banged his oak.” There was the sound of people going back into the room above, and in the silence which followed, broken only by the faintly heard strain of some street music at a distance, the door below, on the first floor landing, was opened a little way, the fingers of a hand appearing round the edge, and a portion of a man’s head came slowly out, as if its owner was listening.

The door was closed once more as softly as it was opened, and the sun, which had been hidden all the morning by leaden clouds, sent a bright sheaf of golden rays through the dust-incrusted staircase window, straight on to

the drab-painted outer door, with the occupant's name thereon in black letters:

Mr Malcolm Stratton.

Chapter Three.

Table of Contents

A bad Quarter of an Hour.

"Well?"

"You rang, sir."

"No, confound you! I did not ring."

"Beg pardon, sir, I'm sure, sir. Electric bell's a little out of order, sir. Tell-tales show wrong numbers, sir."

"I engaged a suite of private rooms in this hotel, and there's not a bit of privacy."

"Very sorry, sir, indeed."

"And look here, waiter."

"Yes, sir."

"When you address me it is customary to say Sir Mark."

"Of course, Sir Mark; my mistake, Sir Mark. I'll mind in future."

"Has the carriage arrived?"

"Not yet, Sir Mark."

"Thank you; that will do. No; a moment. The wedding breakfast. Everything is quite ready, I hope?"

"The head waiter has it in 'and, Sir Mark, and the table looks lovely."

"Thanks. Ahem! a trifle now. I shall remember you when I leave. I spoke a little testily just this minute. A little out of

order, waiter. Touch of my old fever, caught in the East.”

The waiter smiled and bowed as he pocketed a new five-shilling piece, and looked with fresh interest at the fine looking, florid, elderly man who kept pacing the room with a newspaper in his hand as he talked.

“Anything more I can do, Sir Mark, before I leave the room?”

“Hang it all, no, sir,” cried the old officer, flashing out once more irritably. “This is not a public dinner, and I have given you a vail.”

“Of course, Sir Mark; and I didn’t mean—”

“Then why did you use that confounded old stereotyped waiter’s expression? I wonder you did not hand me a toothpick.”

“I beg your pardon, Sir Mark, I’m sure.”

“Go and read ‘Peter Simple,’ and take Chuck’s, the boatswain’s, words to heart.”

“Certainly, Sir Mark,” and the waiter hurried to the door, leaving Admiral Sir Mark Jerrold muttering, and in time to admit a charmingly dressed, fair-haired bridesmaid in palest blue, and wearing a handsome diamond locket at her throat, and a few bright pearls on her cheeks, living pearls, just escaped from her pretty, red-rimmed eyes.

“‘Trencher scraping—shilling seeking—napkin carrying.’ Ah, Edie, my darling—all ready?”

“Yes, uncle, dear; but, oh, you do look cross!”

She clung to his arm and put up her lips to kiss the old man, whose face softened at her touch.

“No, no, my dear, not cross; only worried and irritable. Hang it, Edie, my pet, it’s a horrible wrench to lose her. No

hope of that scoundrel Stratton breaking his neck, or repenting, or anything, is there?"

"Oh, uncle dear, don't. Myra is so happy. She does love him so."

"And her poor old father's nobody now."

"You don't think so, uncle," said the girl, smiling through her tears, as she rearranged the old officer's tie, and gave a dainty touch to the stephanotis in the buttonhole of his blue frock coat. "And you know you want to see her happily married to the man she loves, and who loves her with all his heart."

"Heigho! I suppose so."

"And I've come down to ask if you'd like to see her. They're just putting the last finishing touches."

"So we may," cried Sir Mark eagerly. "Does she look nice?"

"Lovely, uncle; all but—"

The girl ceased speaking, and looked conscious.

"Eh? All but what?"

"You will see, uncle, directly. I will not say any more about it. She would have her own way."

"Here, I'll come at once."

"No, no, uncle dear; I'll go and fetch her down."

"And make a parade of her all through this confounded caravanserai of an hotel!" cried the old man testily. "I can't think why she persisted in having it away from home."

"Yes, you can, uncle dear," said the girl soothingly. "It was very, very natural. But do, do be gentle with her. She is so ready to burst into tears, and I want her to go off as happy as the day."

“Of course, Edie, my dear; of course. I’ll bottle it all up, and then you and your old fool of an uncle can have a good cry together all to ourselves, eh? But I say, little one, no hitches this time in the anchorage.”

“There very nearly was one, uncle.”

“What!” roared the old man, flushing.

“But I set it right with a telegram.”

“What—what was it? Stratton going to shuffle?”

“Oh, uncle, absurd! The bouquet for the bride had not come.”

“Pooh! A woman can be married without a bouquet.”

“No, no, uncle! But I sent off a message, and Mr Guest brought it himself.”

“Then he has been again.”

“Uncle! Why, he’s Malcolm Stratton’s best man.”

“He’s the worst man I know. I loathe him.”

“You don’t, uncle.”

“Yes, I do, and I’m not blind. Do you suppose I want to be left to a desolate old age. Isn’t it bad enough to lose Myra without—”

“Oh, uncle!” cried the girl, whose cheeks were crimson, “there isn’t a moment to lose;” and she darted to the door, leaving the admiral chuckling.

“A wicked little pirate! How soon she showed the red flag aloft. Ah, well, it’s nature—nature, and one mustn’t be selfish. Not much chance. I don’t know what we’re born for, unless it’s to be slaves to other people.”

He turned over his newspaper, and began running down the list of marriages.

“Here they are,” he muttered, “all going the same way,” and he stood musing sadly upon the question of the young women’s quitting the old hives, till the door was opened again and Edie Perrin ushered in her cousin, tall, graceful, and with that indescribable look of love and happiness seen in a bride’s eyes on her wedding morn.

“Here she is, uncle,” cried Edie, who then uttered a sob, and rushed away with a rustling noise to hide the tears she could not restrain.

“My darling!” cried the old man huskily as he drew his child to his breast; “and am I to feel that it is quite right, and that you are happy?”

“Oh, so happy, father; so content at last—at last,” she whispered as she clung to him lovingly. “Only there is one thing.”

“Eh? What—what?” cried the admiral excitedly.

“Leaving home and you.”

The old man drew a deep breath full of relief.

“Oh, pooh, pooh, nonsense, my pet,” he cried, looking at her beautiful pensive face proudly; “don’t mind that; I’m glad of it.”

“Glad, father?”

“No, no, not to lose you, my darling, but for you to go away with the man you love and who loves you. I hate him for taking you, but he is a splendid fellow, Myra. What a sailor he would have made!”

“Yes, father.”

“If they had not spoiled him by getting all that natural history stuff in his head. But I say, my darling,” he continued

as he held his child at arm's length, admiring her, but pushing up his hand.

"Yes, dear?"

"Isn't this a little too—too punctilious? Very lovely, dear; you look all that a man could wish for, but it's a wedding, my pet, and you—you do not quite look like a bride."

"What do the looks matter?" she said with a dreamy look in her large eyes.

"Well, I don't know. Woman ought to please her husband, and isn't it a mistake to dress—well, to parade that nonsense about your being a widow."

"Nonsense, dear?" said Myra, smiling sadly. "It was no nonsense. Whatever that man may have been I swore at the altar to be his faithful wife."

"Till death did you part, eh? Yes, yes, yes," said the admiral testily, "but he's dead and gone and forgotten; there is no need to dig him up again."

"Papa!"

"Well, I mean by going to what will be a real wedding in half mourning."

"Malcolm agreed that I was right, dear."

"Oh, then I'm wrong. Only, if I had known, I should have put my foot down—hard. Why, even Edie was hinting at it just now."

"Let the past rest, dear," said Myra gently.

"After this morning—yes, my darling. But I always feel as if I ought to apologise to you, Myra."

"No, no, dear."

"But I say yes. The clever, plausible scoundrel dazzled me, and I thought your opposition only maidenly shrinking.

Yes, dazzled me, with his wit and cheery manners, knowledge of the world, and such a game, too, as he played at piquet. It was ashore, you see, and he was too much for me. If I'd had him at sea it would have been different. I was to blame all through—but you forgive me all the misery I caused you?”

“My dear father!”

“Ah, there I am crushing your dress again. Stratton's a lucky dog, and we'll think it was all for the best.”

“Of course, dear.”

“Showed what a good true-hearted fellow he was—sort of probationer, eh?”

Myra turned her head. She could not speak—only clung to the parent she was so soon to leave.

“Then good-bye to James Barron, alias Dale, and all his works, Myra. Oh, dear me! In a very short time it will be Mrs Malcolm Stratton, and I shall be all alone.”

“No, you will not, uncle,” said Edie, who had entered unobserved after letting off a fusillade of sobs outside the door, and her pretty grey eyes a little redder, “and you are not to talk like that to Myra; she wants comforting. Uncle will not be alone, dear, for I shall do all I can to make him happy.”

“Bah! A jade, a cheat, my dear. Don't believe her,” cried the admiral merrily; “she has a strange Guest in her eye—Hotspur—Percy. Look at her.”

“Don't, Myra dear. Kiss uncle and come back to your room,” and after a loving embrace between father and daughter the bridesmaid carried off the bride to the room where the travelling trunks lay ready packed, the bridal veil

on a chair; and after the last touches had been given to the bride's toilet, the cousins were left alone.

"Now, Myra darling, any more commands for me about uncle? We may not have another chance."

"No, dear," said the bride thoughtfully. "I could say nothing you will not think of for yourself. Don't let him miss me, dear."

"You know I will not. Bless you, pet; you happy darling, you've won the best husband in the world. But how funny it seems to have to go through all this again."

"Hush, dear. Don't—pray don't talk about it."

"I can't help it, Myra; my tongue will talk this morning. Oh, I am so glad that it will be all right this time."

Myra's brow contracted a little, but her cousin rattled on.

"It has always seemed to me such stuff to talk of you as a widow. Oh, Myra, don't look like that. What a stupid, thoughtless thing I am."

She flung her arms about her cousin, and was again bursting into tears when there was a tap at the door, and she shrank away.

"Come in."

One of the lady's maids appeared.

"Sir Mark says, ma'am, that the carriages are waiting, and Miss Jerrold will not come up."

Myra took her bouquet and turned calmly to her cousin as the maid burst out with:

"God bless you, Miss Myra—I mean madame. May you be very happy."

The second maid was at hand to second the wish, and the pair performed a duet in sobs as the cousins swept